

'Fragging' the Officers

By Ron Ridenhour
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I HAD JUST sat down for a midnight meal with two G.I.'s in the Americal Division's consolidated mess at Chu Lai when the mess sergeant approached. "What unit are you in?" he asked. When I told him that I was a civilian he said I would have to pay for the meal. After I had paid and the sergeant was walking away one of the young soldiers I was with cast a jaundiced eye toward the NCO and said "Lifer! Frag 'im."

Fragging has become the standard response of the Army's little people — the grunts and rear area GI's — to any action directed by their superiors that they consider unnecessary harassment.

What the GI meant with "frag 'im" was threaten, intimidate, or, if necessary, kill the NCO with a fragmentation grenade. Other weapons — M-16's, claymore mines, "C-4" plastic explosives — are also used, but if the premeditated purpose is to threaten, intimidate or murder a superior officer or NCO it is called fragging regardless of the weapon.

Usually a "fragging" threat amounts to just that, a threat; but in a growing number of cases the threats are culminating in the act itself.

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THE PROBLEM was growing at such an alarming rate in the Americal that, according to officers, there was a measureable increase in fragging incidents from week to week until October. In October the Division stopped issuing "frags" to soldiers going on night bunker guard duty at Chu Lai because the GI's were stealing the grenades and throwing them at their superiors instead of the VC.

In place of the frags the division issued additional hand flares but then those started to turn up missing also. Today GI's going on

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night duty in some Americal bunkers have neither grenades nor handflares.

Most fraggings occur in the rear areas and although the seriousness of the situation is generally scoffed at by the brass, young JAG (the Army's judicial branch) officers concede that the number of fragging incidents has increased to an alarming rate.

An additional problem pointed to by JAG officers is that the number of fraggers actually caught and brought to trial represents a small fraction of the incidents that occur. Says one: "A grenade or claymore simply doesn't leave much physical evidence." If a man is not seen in the act by someone willing to talk there's not much chance of bringing him to trial.

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ALTHOUGH most known cases of fragging occur in the rear, many also happen in the field. Fragging in the field is known as "tightening up" or "squaring away" officers or NCO's whom the grunts feel are overzealous for contact with the enemy.

The strategy in Vietnam used to be "find, fix, and destroy the enemy," but for most grunts and many officers it has become "find, fix and go the other way" because no GI wants to be the last, or even the next, American to die in a war that in their words "don't mean nothin'!"

To the grunt in the field it has become a simple matter of survival. The more combat contact they make, as they see it, the poorer their chances for survival. Any officer whom they feel is jeopardizing their chances by being "gung-ho" becomes a legitimate target for fragging.

Fragging, considered homicide by the Army, has adopted such an air of legitimacy among the troops that stories of bounties being placed on particularly unpopular officers' heads are beginning to surface with increasing frequency.

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SOLDIERS have been murdering unpopular officers since war began, of course, but

in Vietnam

seldom if ever has the practice become so common that it has developed its own slang.

According to GI's from the Americal Division at Chu Lai and the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division at Quan Tri, the bounties work something like this: The unpopularity and the necessity to get rid of an officer or NCO "for the common good" is decided by a particular unit in clandestine meetings. The "unit" could be a company, a platoon, or a squad. After a decision is made the bounty is decided upon by common agreement and a collection is taken, each soldier contributing an equal amount. The money is then held by an appointed member of the group. Then one day when a firefight comes along someone takes advantage of the covering chaos of combat and does the deed.

No one knows whether the bounties are ever actually collected by the "fragger" or exactly how much "gung-ho" officers' lives are worth, but the figure reportedly runs from fifty to a thousand dollars.

Fragging has evolved to such a sophisticated degree in the rear areas that now there is a code understood by all. If the troops feel an officer or NCO is being too "hard-nosed" on things traditionally close to the military's heart: military courtesy, appearance, inspections, etc., the offender gets his first warning: a harmless smoke grenade rolled under his bunk while he sleeps. If that doesn't do the trick — if the harassment continues or increases — the guilty party is honored with a "cs" (teargas) grenade during the night. That's it. When a man gets "gassed" he knows he's in trouble. Next time it's going to be a frag and most men get the message. Says one Americal rear area GI: "The lifers know when to quit — they don't push too far."

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"FRAGGING'S" new popularity is attributable to a variety of reasons: boredom, sensitivity to "harassment" or discipline that traditionally goes up as the level of combat comes down, racial tensions and the war's increasing unpopularity among the soldiers fighting it.

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